A Perfect Lure

by JC

PROLOGUE

"What was that?" Alex thought as she shot up in her bed. This had happened many times since her brush with Zelda- and death. *"It's been two weeks and I've still been jumping at every sound."* The first night after she fought Zelda was the easiest; she was too exhausted from the fight to be afraid. The second night was awful. She woke up screaming (causing her parents, Odette and Derek, to rush in) and did not fall back asleep.

Day wasn't bad for Alex, it was at night she feared attack. Some nights she thought about how it could happen. It disgusted her how easy it would be. One sleepy guard- not that it mattered, Zelda would kill him before he had a chance anyway- could be the death of her and her family.

One good thing about her fight with Zelda was that Alex found new power. Even the sleep deprivation didn't bother her, thanks to the Guardian Sword. Every day's practice with the Guardian Sword made her stronger… but never strong enough, it seemed. Or at least, never strong enough not to worry…

The Perfect Lure

Alex woke the next day determined to learn more about the Forbidden Arts- and the Guardian Sword.

Alex was up and ready in no time, as even everyday tasks like this were easier. She went to the dining hall for breakfast, although she had no intention of sitting down to her meal. Alex ate while standing up and prayed that her mother didn't catch her. Odette didn't like to see Alex upset about something, and eating in a hurry would be a dead giveaway.

Finally Alex was free to go. She wrote down a quick note telling where she was (the castle was large and it could've taken a while to find her) and went directly to the library.

Alex spent two days in the library combing through books that only briefly mentioned the Forbidden Arts. "There's got to be more," she thought. "These books aren't giving me anything." She then went to the back corner of the library, where she found the chamber that the Guardian Sword was in. "It's worth a try," she sighed.

Alex opened the bookshelf that sealed the hallway and stepped inside. Remembering how dark it was inside the chamber, she walked back out and grabbed a torch. "If there are no more interruptions…" she thought as she walked back inside.

Alex walked down the narrow hallway until she came to the chamber. Before setting the torch on the wall, she lit three others that seemed to be there for at least fifty years.

When the room was well lit, she noticed a bookshelf. There five books, five very large books. She pulled the first one off the shelf and read the title aloud. "The Saga of the Forbidden Arts" Alex nearly gasped in surprise. For the past two days, she'd been looking for the answers to her questions in books that had barely more than two sentences on the subject. But now, all the answers were in her hands.

She moved on to the next book "Before I start hyperventilating," She thought with some amusement. The next title was just as amazing and surprising as the first. "Defense against the Forbidden Arts: The Guardian Sword." Alex was exhilarated. The next two books were on the same topics, but when she came to the last book, she stopped. It was a journal, and an old one at that. She opened the front cover and gasped when she saw who it belonged to.

Rothbart.

The name was familiar, but she could not wrap her mind around the idea.

Rothbart.

The name, and its meaning, rang in her head until she shook it off. Alex gathered up the books, and staggered out of the hallway, up to the surface. The books' size was no problem, but the stack was so high, she couldn't see where she was going at all.

At last, Alex found, or rather bumped into, a small table for reading. She set the books down, picked Rothbart's journal back up, and sat down as she read through the pages filled with Rothbart's chaotic scrawl.

Alex didn't realize the hour as she skimmed through the last pages of the journal. "Oh no," she muttered. "What's wrong?" asked a voice behind her. She nearly jumped out of her seat when she realized it was only her father. Without looking up, she said, "Whoever left the Guardian Sword, also left this." She held the journal behind her back for her father to see. "It says Rothbart was afraid that the sword would fall into the wrong hands. More accurately, people who are against the forbidden arts. Apparently, the sword is the only thing that can content with the Forbidden Arts." Alex looked at her father, who nodded for her to continue. "In any event, he hid the sword, his journal, and these books," she indicated the large stack next to her, "in the chamber and sealed them away so that- hopefully- no one would ever find them."

"So the sword is also magic?" Derek asked a little tense about the discussion regarding Rothbart. "I guess so… I haven't started the other books yet." "You finished Rothbart's journal?" "Yes," she replied, "but the last three pages… well, no one should ever see them."

Derek skimmed through the pages she pointed out. "Rothbart's notes on the Forbidden Arts," he concluded. Alex nodded. "We should destroy them," Derek said, "I learned that lesson the hard way." He looked at Alex for a moment, "I guess your mother told you about that." Alex again nodded.

Derek was silent for a moment, causing Alex some alarm. "Come on," he finally said, "It's dinner time, and you missed lunch." They left together and when they reached the dining room, Derek threw the entire journal into the fireplace.

Although she had skipped lunch, Alex had no idea just how hungry she was. She ate with her parents and answered their questions about Rothbart's journal. Just before she left, Rogers rushed into the dining room.

"Rogers, what is it?" Odette, who was the first to see him, asked. "O- Odette," he stuttered, "the fields to the west are on fire!" "What?!" Alex exclaimed as she turned to see him. "I'll meet you at the back entrance in a minute!" she called as she rushed for her sword. "If Zelda's involved with this…," she thought.

Alex, as promised, met her father, Bromley, and Matthew, just as he was giving orders. "Matthew, you and Bromley take the main road. Alex, you and I will take the forest and try to catch the person responsible for this. Where is your horse?" Alex shrugged, "What horse can outrun me?"

Before Derek could reply, Odette drove up in the wagon. "I'm going to help put out the fires," she announced. "Alone?" Derek asked worried. "They'll need the help," she replied. "And I'll go with her," Alex added. "Alright," Derek agreed, appeased because Alex would be with Odette, "I'll take the forest." "Alone?" Alex inquired. "I can take care of myself, you know," he retorted. "I know, and so can she, so stop worrying," Alex replied. "And please, for our sake, be careful." "I will, but you'd better catch up to your mother."

Alex looked down the road and saw that her mother was a good distance away. "Must've gotten tired of hearing us," she said. "See you later!" she called as she ran after her mother.

Alex overtook the wagon in no time, easily closing the gap between her and Odette. Alex even smirked proudly as she passed the wagon up. Odette laughed at the comical expression. "Show off!" she called, although she knew Alex couldn't hear her.

Alex and Odette kept moving until they reached a clearing in the forest. In the clearing were the farmer's fields. Alex, because of her enhanced senses, could smell the smoke well before she could see it. She slid to a halt when she reached the edge of the field, and waited for Odette to catch up.

She didn't have to wait long for the wagon to pull up next to her. When Odette was in speaking distance, Alex reported, "It looks like the farmers got the fires under control." She then smirked, "What took you so long?" "Very funny, Alex," Odette replied. "I'll be by that tree over there passing out water." Alex looked to the direction her mother indicated and nodded. "Alright, I'll be making sure all the fires are out." She then took a stack of blankets and was gone. "It took me three trips to load those blankets," Odette thought as Alex took off.

It didn't take long for Alex to help put out the fires. When she finished, she collected the blankets and joined her mother in the wagon. "All finished?" Odette asked, knowing full well the answer. "Yeah," Alex replied. "Since it's been raining, the fires couldn't spread, so the fields aren't totally ruined."

Alex helped Odette pass out water for the rest of the night, receiving thanks from the grateful farmers. At last, all was done and Alex and Odette were ready to return home. Alex hopped into the wagon as Odette was turning it around. "Not running?" Odette asked, surprised that Alex was going to ride with her. "No," Alex responded, "I'm way too tired." Odette wanted to ask her something else, but Alex had already fallen asleep.

Odette tried her best to avoid roots or anything else that would jar the wagon and wake Alex. When Odette looked at her sleeping daughter's face, she saw a peaceful expression that Alex did not often wear while she was awake.

She realized that preventing Alex from waking up was going to be impossible when she saw a huge root that reached across the road. It was absolutely unavoidable. "I hope this doesn't frighten her," she thought.

It frightened her.

When the wagons wheels rolled over the root, Alex cried out and had to hold onto the seat to keep from falling out of the wagon. "I am so sorry for that," Odette apologized. "It wasn't your fault," Alex said. "Just remind me not to fall asleep next time." Odette laughed. "I'll be sure to-" "Wait," Alex interrupted urgently, cutting her off. "Something doesn't feel right.

Alex suddenly realized what was amiss. "The Forbidden Arts are nearby," she warned.

"Zelda…"

"Yes," Alex confirmed. "Take cover, she's not far away." Alex drew her sword in her right hand and balled her left hand into a fist. "Be safe," Odette whispered as she pecked her daughter on the cheek before hiding behind a fallen log.

Alex's face was expressionless as she waited for Zelda to show herself. "She's really stressed," Odette thought as she recognized a habit she had herself.

Finally, Zelda made her appearance and called to Alex, "I know you're not alone. Where's your cowardly mother." Alex's fist tightened in rage. "If you lay one hand on her I swear I'll-" "Oh be quiet," Zelda interrupted, "You're both as good as dead anyway."

"We're as good as dead?" Alex mocked. "I'd take you down right now if you didn't look half dead already." Odette had to stifle a giggle. Alex was right. Zelda definitely wasn't getting any younger.

Now Zelda was extremely angry. "Is this a battle, or a debate?" she snarled. "It would be a battle if you would shut up and fight me," Alex retorted just before she dodged a barrage of Zelda's magic.

Alex was done talking. She nimbly ducked out of the way as again, Zelda fired more magic blasts. She then turned around and jumped at Zelda, gaining a good ten feet off the ground. Zelda saw Alex coming and dodged her. Alex turned around in mid air and kicked off a nearby tree, again launching herself at Zelda. This time Zelda did not move fast enough and Alex knocked her off the fireball she flew on.

Zelda fell for a moment, but the fireball flew under her to catch her. "Just as I thought," Zelda mumbled to herself. "What's that?" Alex called, wanting to know what she said. "I'll deal with you later," said Zelda, this time addressing Alex. For a second time, she disappeared into thin air.

Alex walked over to where her mother hid. "And she called you a coward," Alex said as she helped Odette up. "She ran farther and faster than you ever would." "I'd never leave you, you know. No matter how scared I would be," Odette swore. Alex smiled, "I know you wouldn't."

As Alex walked toward the wagon, she saw the tree where she kicked off and knocked Zelda to the ground. She grimaced, "I've got to find a way to keep her off of that fireball," she thought. Odette, mistaking the meaning of Alex's scowl, thought she might be in pain. "Alex, does your back hurt again?" "What? No." Alex answered, surprised at being pulled out of her thoughts. "I'm just trying to think of a way to keep Zelda off of her fireball. My back is fine."

Again Alex scowled as she remembered the last fight with Zelda. Went she got home, she rushed to her parents' bedroom to hide Zelda's note. The words on the paper still rang in her head from time to time. "There is no ransom. If you don't show up soon Odette will perish, and I'm sure she doesn't want to die here alone…" It was somewhat frightening, to think that someone could be so ruthless and hateful, and she didn't want her parents to worry. The next day, her back was terribly sore, rendering her almost totally immobile. Her back hurt like that for two agonizing days.

Alex was pulled back to the present when her mother interrupted her reverie. "Come on," she said, "I imagine you're father is very worried about us. Alex took her seat in the wagon and smiled. "I won't fall asleep again," she promised as Odette laughed quietly.

The sun was just barely rising as Odette and Alex rode up to Derek and Matt. "Hey you two," Derek said as he helped Odette out of the wagon. Matt tried to offer his hand to Alex, but she jokingly shook it instead and jumped out. Matt laughed, "Princess Independent," he teased. "Squire Helping Hands," she replied.

"What took you so long?" Derek asked. "We've been back for an hour or two." "We had a little run in with Zelda," Alex replied and explained what happened. "Are you okay?" Derek asked urgently. "We're fine," she replied calmly.

"Are you sure? Is your back hurt?"

"If she hurt a hair on your head… Are you sure she didn't hurt you?" Matt added.

"Uggh," Alex groaned. "Calm down you two, stop worrying. Dad, My back is fine, and she didn't hurt me. Matt, I'm fairly sure every hair on my head is intact. I'm not going to fall over and die right here." After Alex said this, Matt and Derek seemed calmed down a little bit. "Why would she burn the fields? Seems like a small target for a sorceress like her," Matt wondered aloud. "It's the perfect lure," said Alex, answering his question. "It's the only thing that would bring us all out at once." "You're probably right," Derek agreed, "but why would she fight you for such a short period of time and then just run away like that."

Alex pondered that for a moment. Finally, she gave up, unable to think of a good answer. "I honestly don't know," she said. "Maybe to find out how strong you are?" Odette offered. They all thought about that for a moment. "That actually makes sense," Derek said. "Mom, I think you're right," Alex concluded after she thought about it. "She fought me just long enough to see some of what I can do, but not long enough to get injured while fighting."

Now that Alex knew what Zelda was planning, Alex knew exactly how she wanted to spend the rest of her day; practicing. She worked harder than ever before, practicing sword fighting with Matt and archery with Derek. To challenge herself, she used a timer to see how far she could go in one minute. She continued this for four days, nut on the fifth day; she was too exhausted to train.

Alex sat against a tree on a hill that overlooked Swan Lake. As she began to read "Defense against the Forbidden Arts: The Guardian Sword." a familiar voice began to speak to her. "Too tired to practice, Princess?" it asked. The voice was that of Puffin, one of her parents' friends, who's wing Odette healed on occasion. "Hi Puffin," Alex said as she set the book down. "Yes, I'm too tired to practice. In fact, I'm utterly exhausted." Puffin chuckled, "Well I'm sure everyone gets tired of the 'ole 'swish swish clang clang'" Alex laughed as Puffin made sound effects while pretending to swordfight an invisible enemy. "Yeah, I thought today I would just relax a little bit. But if Zelda comes, I'll be ready."

Alex flopped back onto the cool, green grass. She sighed, "Things have been kind of tense for me lately. It's like every time I try to relax, something else comes along and disrupts the peace." "Well, Alex you have no fear-" "I hate it when he says that!" another voice cut in. "Hello Jean- Bob." Alex said. Jean- Bob was also another one of her parents' animal friends. He was notorious for thinking he was a prince. "Well, most of you are here. Where's Speed?" Speed the tortoise was the third in the trio of animals. "Mister Molasses is on his way," Jean- Bob answered curtly. "Come on Jean- Bob. Be nice. I happen to like 'Mister Molasses'"

Alex waited for a while for Speed to arrive. Before she knew what was happening, however, she closed her eyes and there, in the mid morning sun, she fell asleep.

Alex woke to a setting sun, and Odette calling her. "Oh no!" she exclaimed. "How long was I asleep Puffin?" "Since this morning, princess," he replied. "Ooops." "Something wrong?" he asked. "No, mom just likes me to tell her where I'm going." "Just tell her you were with a handsome prince," Jean- Bob said, of course referring to himself, "I'm sure it will be alright if you tell her that." "Right," Alex muttered sarcastically, "I'll be sure to do that. See you later!"

Alex met up with Odette quickly. "Where were you?" she asked. "I was on that hill near Swan Lake. Sorry I was so late. I fell asleep." "You fell asleep?" "Yes," Alex said. "Again, sorry I was so late." "No," Odette replied, "I'm actually glad you were sleeping. I can tell you haven't been."

"I don't really need the extra sleep anyway."

"I know. But I think you should at least try." Alex didn't respond. "For me?" Odette pressed. Alex smiled. There was no way she could say no to that. "Alright, I promise I'll try to take better care of myself, for you." "Let's go to dinner," Odette suggested. "Frederick is supposed to be trying a new recipe."

They had no sooner started walking when the castle floor began to rumble unnaturally. "Whoa!" Alex exclaimed in surprise. Odette found herself gripping Alex's shoulder to keep herself from falling. After a few seconds it was all over. "Was that an earthquake?" Odette asked. Alex walked over to the window, when she looked out, she could see that everything else was unharmed. "There's no way an earthquake did that, nothing else seems to be affected," she answered. "Tell dad that I'm going to go see what happened. I'll be back as soon as possible." "I'm going with you," said Odette, "You might need help." "Are you sure? It could be dangerous." Odette laughed, though it was without humor. "I've been in danger before, Alex."

They made their way to the stable and readied the wagon. Matt was their, brushing his beautiful white stallion. "Matt, tell my father that my mom and I are going to see what happened," Alex said. "Alright," Matt replied, "be careful okay?" "I will," Alex promised. Odette and Alex readied the wagon and were off in no time.

They started by taking the forest road, toward the farms. "I doubt the fields suffered any extreme damage," Alex said. "Let's go toward the town." Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, Alex could see a bright light. When she turned around all the way, she could see a large ball of green fire. "Oh great," Alex muttered sarcastically. "Mom, how long would it take to go back to the castle?" "About fifteen minutes. Why?" "I really don't think we have five minutes let alone fifteen." "Why?" Odette asked again. "Turn around," Alex said urgently. "A seeker!" Odette exclaimed. "The earthquake was a lure! And we fell for it big time! Great!" Alex yelled.

Odette drove faster, pushing the horse to its limits. To Alex's annoyance, the seeker was gaining on them. "I'm going to try and repel it!" she yelled. "Can you do that?" Odette asked. "I think so; I've never tried it before." Alex jumped behind the seat to face the seeker head on. When it got close enough, Alex swung at it. The fireball backed off a bit, but it was not deterred. "Great!" Alex thought. "Clearly this is going to be harder than I hoped."

Alex then jumped out of the wagon. "Where are you going?" Odette demanded. "I'm going to try and get it away from you," Alex called back. The Fireball did follow her, but only for a short time. It veered back off and flew at Odette. "No!" Alex yelled. She quickly ran over to the wagon and jumped back in. "What happened?" Odette called. "The fireball's after both of us. I can't get it away!"

The wagon careened on, as Alex desperately tried to think of a solution. Suddenly, the fireball accelerated and knocked Alex out of the wagon. "Alex!" Odette screamed as she saw her daughter roll on the ground in pain. Alex was able to get back up, although her crash to the ground was violent. She began to run after Odette and easily caught up. "I'm okay!" she shouted.

Without warning, the horse became unable to control, spooked by the fireball. Somehow, the horse was able to break free of the chain that held it to the wagon. The horse ran off, leaving the wagon to roll out of control. The fireball then captured Odette. Then it quickly whirled around and met Alex head on. It was inescapable, the seeker now had Alex.

"Are you alright?" Odette asked, worried that Alex might be hurt. "I'm fine, Alex promised. They rode in silence the rest of the way to Zelda's lair.

"Well this seems a little familiar," Odette remarked.

They flew into the mouth of a cave where a strange light was glowing. "Whatever she's doing in there, it's not going to be good for us," murmured Alex. When the fireball got close enough to the ground, Alex jumped off of it. "What are you doing?!" Odette shouted. "Shh!" Alex said. "I'll meet you in there soon."

Odette flew into the deepest part of the cave alone, frightened, and curious as to what Alex was about to do.

Zelda, who, of course, was waiting, was surprised and angry to see that Alex was not with Odette. "Where is Alex?!" she bellowed. "Right here!" voice from nowhere called. Suddenly, Alex flew at Zelda and threw a punch so hard that it sent Zelda flying. "I've wanted to do that for a really long time!" Alex yelled in triumph.

Alex drew her sword and had to dodge some magic blasts that Zelda threw back in retaliation. She was just about to attack again, but as she jumped, a blast of magic blind sided her. Alex hit the wall and was stunned for a second. She then shook the debris from the stone wall from her hair. A figure then emerged from the blackness. "Sorry I'm late," its voice said. An old man took form as the figure stepped into the light. "Just who are you?" Alex yelled angrily. "Clauvius," Odette whispered. "Great," Alex mumbled, "two against one."

"I wouldn't count on that!" another voice called. This time, Alex knew who was speaking. "Matt! Am I glad to see you!" Alex called in joyful surprise. "Yeah, yeah, all of that nick- of- time hero stuff," he said as he rushed to her side. Derek rushed to Odette's side. "Are you alright?" he asked immediately upon seeing her. "Yes," she answered, "and I think Alex is too. Can she handle both of them?" "She won't have to!" Matt yelled, answering her question. "I'll take the old man," he said, this time to Alex. "Okay, I'll take Zelda."

The double duel began. Alex was doing her best to attack, but Zelda was avoiding her every move. Matthew was also struggling as Clauvius blasted him with vicious attacks. "You don't know when to give up!" Zelda taunted. "I don't like to give up," Alex corrected, "there's a difference!" "You're as bad as your little friend," Clauvius jeered, "Can't either of you see that it's impossible for you to win?" "The only thing that's impossible is you shutting up!" Matt shot back, flinching because of his pain and the force it took to yell.

Suddenly, the fight stopped as Alex was hit with a barrage of magic. She hit the ground with a thud, as Zelda laughed. "Did you see that Odette?" she cackled. "She was dead before she hit the ground!" Zelda wasn't the only one laughing, however. The other laughter was that of Alex as she grabbed Zelda's ankle and tripped her. "Funny how you can feel most alive when you're dead," Alex bantered. Zelda recovered, and Alex had to once again dodge a volley of magic.

Finally, Alex swung her sword at Zelda, who had to jump onto the floor to avoid the blow. At the same time, Matt finally dodged a magic blast and saw the opening he needed. He also swung his sword for a final blow in a ditch attempt to end the fight. His attack would have worked if Clavius had not used his magic to disappear. Zelda also vanished, but before she did she made a promise. "We'll finish this one day, but not here. We'll finish it on my terms," She then sent a blast at Alex who instinctively tried to avoid it. Unfortunately, it hit the cave's wall and triggered a collapse.

"You're going to pay for that!" Alex vowed, hearing Zelda's wild cackle although she had already escaped. "Come on! This place will come down on top of us any second!" she warned.

All four of them made it safely out of the cave and onto the wagon, which Matt had brought back to meet them. Alex and Odette climbed into the wagon as Derek and Matt mounted their horses. "Don't worry Alex, Zelda won't get away. We will get her." Derek promised, seeing the disappointed look in Alex's eyes.

Alex looked up at him to reply, but forgot what she was going to say when she saw Matt. He looked awful; blood staining his shirt and hair, now matted and dirty because of it. "Are you okay Matt?!" She exclaimed. Matt laughed it off, but winced in pain. "I'm okay," he said, "It could've been a lot worse if it had to be." "I'm so sorry," Alex apologized, "I shouldn't have let you fight Clauvius." Again Matt laughed, "The only thing I regret about fighting him was that he got away. And for the record, I would never let them fight you two against one."

By the time the four of them made it back to the castle at Swan Lake, Odette had to shake Alex awake; she'd fallen fast asleep.

Afterward

After thinking about her fight for a few days she asked Matt a question. "How did you know to come for me?" Matt smiled, "I knew you'd need help, so I followed you. The first time you fought Zelda, you looked terrible. You looked frail and close to death," all traces of a smile gone, he continued, "I hated seeing you like that. You never struck me as a weak person, and yet, you looked as if a falling leaf could've killed you. It scared me. This time I wanted to prevent that."

"I'm glad you came," she replied, "I don't think I would have made it without you, but you didn't have to come" He smiled again as he took her hand, Alex smiled and blushed. "Alex," he said, "I don't think you know what you mean to me. I would've been there, even if it would've killed me. I swear I would've been there." He paused for a moment. "Alex, I love you." Alex was completely stunned. She looked into his dark brown eyes that seemed to reinforce what he just said. "I love you too," was all she could say before he kissed her.

After the kiss, "The kiss," Alex thought, Matt was serious again. He looked at Alex and swore, "We'll beat Zelda and Clauvius. Together." "We'll be ready for them," Alex added as they watched the sun disappear behind the mountains.

Posted on 6 April 2008

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